

A Second Look

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By Chris Edmonson

You may recall a tragedy that occurred a couple of years ago. There was a powerboat lost with all hands approximately 80 miles southwest of Puerto Peñasco. It was a catamaran fishing boat and it was with shock that the family enlisted the aid of pilots and fishermen and finally found the boat and some of the bodies. There are lessons to be learned from this incident... even (especially) for sail boaters.

From the accounts of what condition the boat on the boat. The report was that the skipper had a problem before he left the dock and had put aboard new batteries. If the alternator on his motor was not functioning he might have bled down the charge not realizing that he was not recharging the batteries on his way out to the fishing site. No one knows for sure but this scenario certainly suggests itself. Once out in the location of his fishing the skipper may have trolled for a time and then for some reason turned off his motor or it may have stopped operating. It was then that he and his crew discovered the engine would not start again.

The boat was found overturned. What caused the capsize and could it have been prevented?

Most of us sail monohulled boats or if we use catamarans we know some things that will help keep us out of trouble. What may have happened with this accident is that the boat simply got sideways to the sea and turned over.

When you look at a powerboat you notice a few things right away. The rudder is small and as a result you lose steerage at speeds we might well be capable of continuing sailing with. In fact, it has been said that the sign of a good sailor is that he/she can continue to sail in flat and almost windless conditions. On a powerboat you don't have that option. Without forward momentum you are out of control. A sailboat tends to keep its

bow to the wind but can also find itself sideways. It does get there later than a powerboat so we don't tend to think about it as much. Catamarans tend not to be heavy displacement boats. This means that they are more subject to wind effects in low speed situations. They will present the broadest "sail" area, the hull, when not under control.

The theory expressed here is that the boat in the accident had no steerage and was not pointed into the wind and seas. The wind was up that day... in the range of 30 to 40 knots... so the seas would have been running fairly high. In the Sea of Cortez my experience has been that the short distances involved generate a steep, short period wave. If that were the conditions of that day then the emergency the boat thought it had was not same as the emergency it really had. You can imagine the captain and crew opening the engine compartment and looking into whether they could spot a way to start the motor or perhaps the battery compartment to see if there was a loose connection. If the boat was outboard powered perhaps they concentrated on the outboard(s) by opening the cowling. In any case, it takes time; precious seconds even, in a seaway to do these things. In the meantime the boat is not rounding up but instead going sideways. Once there it would be climbing each wave in more and more peril. A steep eight-foot wave front is more than enough to turtle a boat and those were the conditions reported that day in the cruising radio nets.

The real emergency in this case was that the boat needed to be pointed toward the wind while they sorted out how to start the motor, or lacking that capability, would lay ahull in relative peace. Had the crew put out a bucket or an open ice chest tethered with as much line (rope) as could be found on board or even high test strength fishing line from the bow it would have brought the bow to weather. By keeping the bow into the wind they would then have had time to deal with the engine's issue. Of course, with the exception of anchor rode, powerboats don't tend to have much rope aboard. Sailboats certainly do.

We know how or should know how to bring our bow into the wind, back wind the jib, release the main and then push the tiller up into the wind to

heave to. For a sailboat this is a built-in safety feature of the boat. Sometimes it is not enough.

Especially in radical conditions it is not enough. A sea anchor is something to consider deploying in conditions where you cannot leave any sail up but have a large need to slow the boat and keep the bow to the wind. In experiments it has been found that it does not take much surface area on the sea anchor to hold the nose of a sailboat to windward. The largest consideration is the strength of the attachment of the line to the anchor. It is also a good idea to have a swivel of some sort at that same point to keep the anchor aligned to its best advantage. Learning to heave to is an essential skill. Knowing what to do if that is not enough is more than a good idea no matter where you sail. In the Sea of Cortez conditions deteriorate rapidly and knowing when to call it a day is also essential. Since the Sea is narrow in most of the places you are likely to go the leeward shore since it is never that far away in a nasty blow. You have to assume that Murphy will be present and have to have the equipment to overcome the problem.

For the Captain and the crew lost in overwhelming circumstance we can grieve. For our friends who go to sea hereafter we can caution all to be better prepared.